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RUEHOK/AMCONSUL OSAKA KOBE PRIORITY 1076
RUEHKSO/AMCONSUL SAPPORO PRIORITY 8853
RUCPDOC/DEPT OF COMMERCE WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY
RUEATRS/TREASURY DEPT WASHDC PRIORITY
RHEHAAA/NSC WASHDC PRIORITY
RHHMUNA/HQ USPACOM HONOLULU HI PRIORITY
RHEHAAA/WHITE HOUSE WASHDC PRIORITY
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 TOKYO 004795

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 08/20/2016

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [JA](#)

SUBJECT: ASO ENTERS LDP PRESIDENT RACE

REF: A. TOKYO 4739

[¶](#)B. TOKYO 4561

Classified By: CDA JOSEPH R. DONOVAN. REASONS 1.4 (B)(D)

[¶](#)1. (SBU) Summary. Foreign Minister Taro Aso announced his candidacy for Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) Presidency on August 21; however, every indication suggests that frontrunner Shinzo Abe will win by a wide margin. In campaign pledges released the same day, Aso promised to focus on economic growth, rural revitalization, and improved relations with Asian neighbors. Several Embassy Tokyo contacts suggest that Aso is in the race to lend legitimacy to Abe's campaign, and is almost certain to be rewarded with another Cabinet job. End summary.

[¶](#)2. (U) Foreign Minister Taro Aso became the second candidate to throw his hat into the ring for the September 20 Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) presidential contest, with an announcement at LDP headquarters in Tokyo on August 21. One day earlier, he debated policy with Finance Minister Sadokazu Tanigaki in front of the LDP's Oita Prefecture chapter, near his hometown of Fukuoka. Tanigaki, who declared for the race on July 27, has been running slightly ahead of Aso in opinion polls for over a month; however, both trail Chief Cabinet Secretary Shinzo Abe by as many as 40 percentage points.

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[¶](#)3. (SBU) Aso released a set of policy proposals on August 21, which tracked with a preview of his campaign platform he gave during the August 20 debate with Tanigaki in Oita. Giving Prime Minister Koizumi high marks for his efforts at structural reform. Aso, at the same time, expressed concern that Japan's economic recovery has been uneven. He stated his intention to favor economic growth over fiscal reconstruction, saying it was "not wrong" to use public works projects to give a boost to rural areas. He said that relations with the United States must remain the cornerstone of Japan's foreign policy. He also called for improved ties with Asian neighbors.

[¶](#)4. (SBU) Of the three candidates in the race, Aso has the broadest government experience, having served as Minister of Internal Affairs and Communication (2003-2005), State Minister for Economic and Fiscal Policy (2001), and State

Minister for Economic Planning (1996-1997). The nine-term Lower House Diet member also has a wealth of experience in party politics. He served as LDP Policy Affairs Research Council Chair for two years after losing the LDP presidential race to Prime Minister Koizumi in 2001. He was appointed Foreign Minister in October 2005. He has an impressive family history; he is the grandson of late Prime Minister Shigeru Yoshida, the son-in-law of former Prime Minister Zenko Suzuki, and has connections to the royal family by marriage. He studied at Stanford University and the University of London and speaks English fluently. He was a member of Japan's skeet shooting team in the 1976 Montreal Olympics and is an accomplished golfer. On the downside, Aso needs to overcome his image as a lackluster campaigner. He has also drawn criticism for alleged forced labor abuses by Aso family business interests during World War II, when his father ran large coal mines in Kyushu.

¶5. (C) Comment. Aso has promised to go the distance in his campaign, despite Abe's wide lead and the requirement that he receive the backing of at least 20 LDP Diet members. An Embassy contact from Aso's own 11-member Kono faction has assured us that Aso will almost certainly get the full support of his own faction. The 65-year-old Aso is also likely to hold some appeal for the older elements of the LDP who see Abe, 51, as too unseasoned and inexperienced. Aso is not believed to enjoy particularly strong support among Diet members from his home turf in Kyushu, but is certainly popular with voters there. Other LDP Diet members have said privately they do not believe he would still be running if he didn't have the required votes in the Diet, implying that his continued candidacy might be intended to serve the interests of the party in not having Abe run unopposed. A close advisor to Prime Minister Koizumi echoed that sentiment, noting that Abe and Aso were actually quite close. Most LDP contacts and journalists with whom we've spoken have no doubt

TOKYO 00004795 002 OF 002

Aso will get a Cabinet post for his efforts. Some suggest that Aso might be positioning himself for a future shot at the leadership.

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